



GLOBAL FORCES, LOCAL IMPACTS

India's Marriage Dowries

Global diffusion of popular social customs has had an unintended negative impact for women in India: an increase in demand for dowries. A dowry is a "gift" from the family of a bride to the family of a groom, as a sign of respect. Though illegal in India since 1961, the dowry has regained popularity in recent years.

Traditionally, the local custom in much of India was for the groom to provide a small dowry to the bride's family. Now, the custom has reversed, and the family of a bride is often expected to provide a substantial dowry to the husband's family.

Dowries have become much larger in modern India, an important source of income for the groom's family. A dowry can take the form of either cash or expen-

sive consumer goods, such as motor vehicles, electronics, and household appliances.

The government has tried to ban dowries because of the adverse impact on women. If the bride's family is unable to pay a promised dowry or installments, the groom's family may cast the bride out on the street, and her family may refuse to take her back. Husbands and in-laws angry over the small size of dowry payments have killed 5,000 to 7,000 women during the 1990s and early twenty-first century, according to government statistics.

Because a boy will generate revenue, whereas a girl will impose a significant burden, a fetus is more likely to be aborted if it is found to be a girl. A study of a Mumbai (Bombay) clinic found that

7,999 of 8,000 aborted fetuses were female. In families where food is scarce, girls age 1 to 5 are 43 percent more likely than boys to die of hunger or malnutrition, according to another study.

In a highly publicized case, just before the start of a wedding ceremony in 2000, a groom's family demanded a dowry of \$25,000 in cash, in addition to two televisions, two home theater sets, two refrigerators, two air conditioners, and one car that had already been paid. The bride halted the ceremony and called the police on her cell phone. The family was arrested for violation of the 1961 anti-dowry law. The story appeared in the *Times of India* with the headline "It Takes Guts to Send Your Groom Packing."

stations. These three countries are also the major exporters of programs. Even in Europe, the United States has been the source of imports of two-thirds of entertainment programs.

Leaders of many LDCs view the spread of television as a new method of economic and cultural imperialism on the part of the MDCs, especially the United States. American television, like other media, presents characteristically American beliefs and social forms, such as upward social mobility, relative freedom for women, glorification of youth, and stylized violence. These attractive themes may conflict with and drive out traditional social customs.

To avoid offending traditional values, many satellite broadcasters in Asia do not carry MTV or else allow governments to censor unacceptable videos. Cartoons featuring Porky Pig may be banned in Muslim countries, where people avoid pork products. Instead, entertainment programs emphasize family values and avoid controversial cultural, economic, and political issues.

WESTERN CONTROL OF NEWS MEDIA. Less developed countries fear the effects of the news-gathering capability of the media even more than their entertainment function. The diffusion of information to newspapers around the world is dominated by the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters, which are owned by American and British companies, respectively.

The process of gathering news worldwide is expensive, and most newspapers and broadcasters are unable to afford their own correspondents. Instead, they buy the right to use the dispatches of one or more of the main news organizations. The AP transmits most news photographs and provides radio stations around the world with reports from its correspondents.

Similarly, the AP and Reuters Television supply most of the world's television news video.

The news media in most LDCs are dominated by the government, which typically runs the radio and TV service as well as the domestic news-gathering agency. Newspapers may be owned by the government, a political party, or a private individual, but in any event they are dependent on the government news-gathering organization for information. Sufficient funds are not available to establish a private news service.

Many African and Asian government officials criticize the Western concept of freedom of the press. They argue that American news organizations reflect American values and do not provide a balanced, accurate view of other countries. Under such conditions, news-gathering organizations are more interested in covering earthquakes, hurricanes, or other sensational disasters than in reporting more meaningful but less visual and dramatic domestic stories, such as birth-control programs, health-care innovations, or construction of new roads.

Nevertheless, according to a study by the British Institute of Communications, television newscasts throughout the world have allocated the vast majority of time to domestic stories. On the same night, these were the first stories on the most widely watched nationwide newscasts:

- Brazil: traffic jam in Rio de Janeiro
- India: the birthday of the assassinated former prime minister Indira Gandhi
- Japan: sumo wrestling results
- Kuwait: the day's activities of the ruling sheik
- Thailand: the increasing cost of eggs

Veteran travelers and journalists invariably pack a portable shortwave radio when they visit other countries. In many regions of the world, the only reliable and unbiased news accounts come from the BBC World, Service shortwave and satellite radio newscasts. Reliance on BBC newscasts is especially strong in war zones.

Environmental Impact of Popular Culture

Popular culture is less likely than folk culture to be distributed with consideration for physical features. The spatial organization of popular culture reflects the distribution of social and economic features. In a global economy and culture, popular culture appears increasingly uniform.

Modifying Nature

Popular culture can significantly modify or control the environment. It may be imposed on the environment rather than spring forth from it, as with many folk customs. For many popular customs the environment is something to be modified to enhance participation in a leisure activity or to promote the sale of a product. Even if the resulting built environment looks "natural," it is actually the deliberate creation of people in pursuit of popular social customs.

DIFFUSION OF GOLF. Golf courses, because of their large size (80 hectares, or 200 acres), provide a prominent example of imposing popular culture on the environment. A surge in U.S. golf popularity has spawned construction of roughly 200 courses during the past two decades. Geographer John Rooney attributes this to increased income and leisure time, especially among recently retired older people and younger people with flexible working hours.

According to Rooney, the provision of golf courses is not uniform across the United States. Although perceived as a warm-weather sport, the number of golf courses per person is actually greatest in north-central states, from Kansas to North Dakota, as well as the northeastern states abutting the Great Lakes, from Wisconsin to upstate New York (Figure 4-16). People in these regions have a long tradition of playing golf, and social clubs with golf courses are important institutions in the fabric of the regions' popular customs.

In contrast, access to golf courses is more limited in the South, in California, and in the heavily urbanized Middle Atlantic region between New York City and Washington, D.C. Rapid population growth in the South and West and lack of land on which to build in the Middle Atlantic region have reduced the number of courses per capita. However, selected southern and western areas, such as coastal South Carolina, southern Florida, and central Arizona, have high concentrations of golf courses as a result of the arrival of large numbers of golf-playing northerners, either as vacationers or as permanent residents.

Golf courses are designed partially in response to local physical conditions. Grass species are selected to thrive in the local climate and still be suitable for the needs of greens, fairways, and roughs. Existing trees and native vegetation are retained if possible (few fairways in Michigan are lined by palms). Yet, like other popular customs, golf courses remake the environment—creating or flattening hills, cutting grass or letting it grow tall, carting in or digging up sand for traps, and draining or expanding bodies of water to create hazards.

Uniform Landscapes

The distribution of popular culture around the world tends to produce more uniform landscapes. The spatial expression of a popular custom in one location will be similar to another. In fact, promoters of popular culture want a uniform appearance to generate "product recognition" and greater consumption.

FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS. The diffusion of fast-food restaurants is a good example of such uniformity. Such restaurants are usually organized as franchises. A franchise is a company's agreement with businesspeople in a local area to market that company's product. The franchise agreement lets the local outlet use the company's name, symbols, trademarks, methods, and architectural styles. To both local residents and travelers, the buildings are immediately recognizable as part of a national or multinational company. A uniform sign is prominently displayed.

Much of the attraction of fast-food restaurants comes from the convenience of the product and the use of the building as a low-cost socializing location for teenagers or families with



Beijing McDonald's. U.S. fast-food chains have diffused to other countries, including China. Corporate logos enable customers to instantly identify the establishment regardless of whether they know the language.



Route 66. When it connected Chicago and Angeles, Route 66 was once a well-known symbol of an especially prominent element of U.S. popular culture—the freedom to drive a car across the country's wide open spaces. Most of Route 66 has been replaced by interstate highways, and the remaining stretches are often cluttered by unattractive development, dominated by large signs for national gasoline, lodging, and restaurant chains.

young children. At the same time, the success of fast-food restaurants depends on large-scale mobility: people who travel or move to another city immediately recognize a familiar place. Newcomers to a particular place know what to expect in the restaurant, because the establishment does not reflect strange and unfamiliar local customs that could be uncomfortable.

Fast-food restaurants were originally developed to attract people who arrived by car. The buildings generally were brightly colored, even gaudy, to attract motorists. Recently built fast-food restaurants are more subdued, with brick facades, pseudo-antique fixtures, and other stylistic details. To facilitate reconstruction in case the restaurant fails, company signs are often free-standing rather than integrated into the building design.

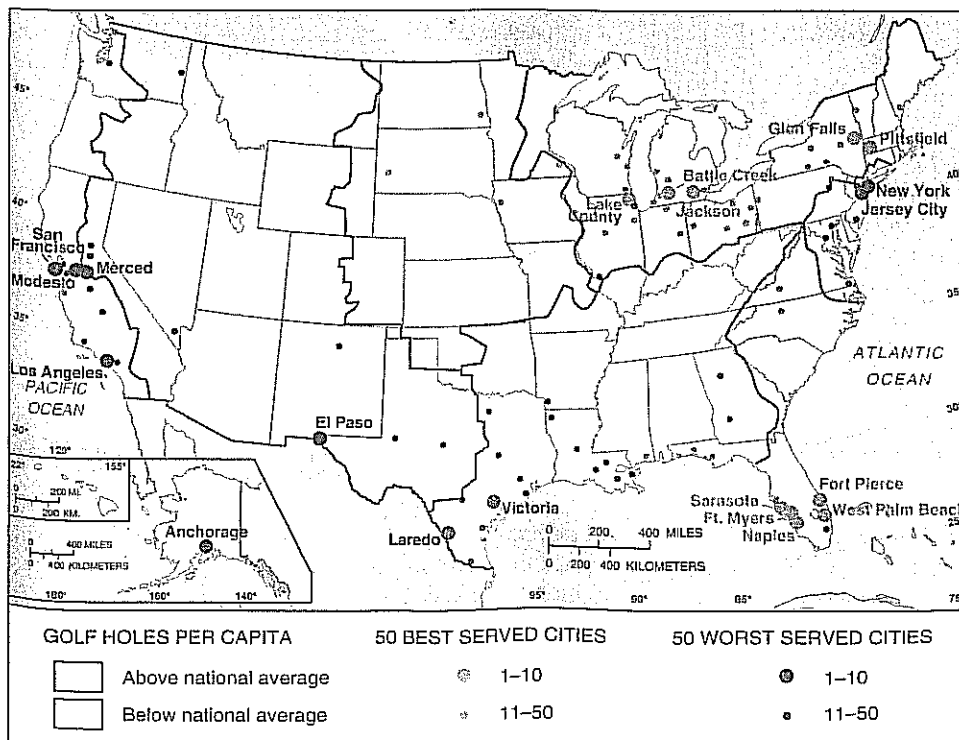


FIGURE 4-16 The 50 best-served and worst-served metropolitan areas in terms of the number of golf courses per capita. In the north-central states, people have a long tradition of playing golf, even if it is confined to the summer months. The ratio is less favorable for golf in the large urban areas of the East Coast, as well as in the rapidly growing areas of the South and West.

Uniformity in the appearance of the landscape is promoted by a wide variety of other popular structures in North America, such as gas stations, supermarkets, and motels. These structures are designed so that both local residents and visitors immediately recognize the purpose of the building, even if not the name of the company.

GLOBAL DIFFUSION OF UNIFORM LANDSCAPES. Physical expression of uniformity in popular culture has diffused from North America to other parts of the world. American motels and fast-food chains have opened in other countries. These establishments appeal to North American travelers, yet most customers are local residents who wish to sample American customs they have seen on television.

Diffusion of popular culture across Earth is not confined to products that originate in North America. With faster communications and transportation, customs from anyplace on Earth can rapidly diffuse elsewhere. Japanese vehicles and electronics, for example, have diffused in recent years to the rest of the world, including North America. Until the 1970s, vehicles produced in North America, Europe, and Japan differed substantially in appearance and size, but in recent years styling has become more uniform, largely because of consumer preference around the world for Japanese vehicles. Automakers such as General Motors, Ford, Toyota, and Honda now manufacture similar models in North and South America, Europe, and Asia, instead of separately designed models for each continent.

Negative Environmental Impact

The diffusion of some popular customs can adversely impact environmental quality in two ways—depletion of scarce natural resources and pollution of the landscape.

INCREASED DEMAND FOR NATURAL RESOURCES. Diffusion of some popular customs increases demand for raw materials, such as minerals and other substances found beneath Earth's surface. The depletion of resources used to produce energy, especially petroleum, is discussed in Chapter 14.

Popular culture may demand a large supply of certain animals, resulting in depletion or even extinction of some species. For example, some animals are killed for their skins, which can be shaped into fashionable clothing and sold to people living thousands of kilometers from the animals' habitat. The skins of the mink, lynx, jaguar, kangaroo, and whale have been heavily

consumed for various articles of clothing, to the point that the survival of these species is endangered. This unbalances ecological systems of which the animals are members. Folk culture may also encourage the use of animal skins, but the demand is usually smaller than for popular culture.

Increased demand for some products can strain the capacity of the environment. An important example is increased meat consumption. This has not caused extinction of cattle and poultry; we simply raise more. But animal consumption is an inefficient way for people to acquire calories—90 percent less efficient than if people simply ate grain directly.

To produce 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of beef sold in the supermarket, nearly 10 kilograms (22 pounds) of grain are consumed by the animal. For every kilogram of chicken, nearly 3 kilograms (6.6 pounds) of grain are consumed by the fowl. This grain could be fed to people directly, bypassing the inefficient meat step. With a large percentage of the world's population undernourished, some question this inefficient use of grain to feed animals for eventual human consumption.

POLLUTION. Popular culture also can pollute the environment. The environment can accept and assimilate some level of waste from human activities. But popular culture generates a high volume of waste—solids, liquids, and gases—that must be absorbed into the environment. Although waste is discharged in all three forms, the most visible is solid waste—cans, bottles, old cars, paper, and plastics. These products are often discarded rather than recycled. With more people adopting popular customs worldwide, this problem grows.

Folk culture, like popular culture, can also cause environmental damage, especially when natural processes are ignored. A widespread belief exists that indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere practiced more “natural,” ecologically sensitive agriculture before the arrival of Columbus and other Europeans. Geographers increasingly question this. In reality, pre-Columbian folk customs included burning grasslands for planting and hunting, cutting extensive forests, and overhunting some species. Very high rates of soil erosion have been documented in Central America from the practice of folk culture.

The more developed societies that produce endless supplies for popular culture have created the technological capacity both to create large-scale environmental damage and to control it. However, a commitment of time and money must be made to control the damage. Adverse environmental impact of popular culture is further examined in Chapter 14.

SUMMARY

Material culture can be divided into two types—folk and popular. Folk culture most often exists among small, homogeneous groups living in relative isolation at a low level of economic development. Popular culture is characteristic of societies with good communications and transportation, which enable rapid diffusion of uniform concepts. Geographers are concerned with several aspects of folk and popular culture.

Geographers study an array of thousands of social customs with distinctive spatial distributions. Groups display preferences in providing material needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, and in leisure activities such as performing arts and recreation. Examining where various social customs are practiced helps us to understand the extent of cultural diversity in the world.